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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: A/S FRAZER DISCUSSES DEMOCRATIC CLIMATE
WITH OPPOSITION LEADERS

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES VICKI HUDDLESTON FOR REASONS 1.4. (B)
AND (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Leaders from major Ethiopian opposition parties gathered at the Charge,s residence June 24 to brief A/S Frazer on the current political climate for the opposition, including the status of negotiations with the GoE on reforms to Parliamentary rules. Opposition leaders were split on whether the GoE had offered enough in talks, with the Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP) expressing relative satisfaction and the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) still holding out for more. The Charge and A/S Frazer reiterated to the leaders that they must work together in order to strengthen their bargaining position and to best represent their constituents. A/S Frazer expressed concern at reports that the party representatives are restricted by the GoE from having access to their voters, stressing that having direct access to constituents is a fundamental aspect of democracy. In discussions on matters of foreign policy, particularly in the region, A/S Frazer urged parliamentarians to reach out to their counterparts in other parts of East Africa in order to overcome the information gap that exists between governments and parliaments in British-based parliamentary systems. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On June 24, A/S Frazer and the Charge met with the leaders from the primary opposition groups in Ethiopia. Pol/Econ Counselor, PAO, Special Assistant Kendra Gaither, Djibouti and Somalia Desk Officer Nole Garey and Poloff joined the meeting. The CUDP was represented by Temesgen Zewdie and Ayele Chamiso, the UEDF by Beyene Petros and Merera Gudina and the OFDM by Bulcha Demeksa. Former President Negaso Gidada, an independent MP, also attended.

SEEKING AGREEMENT ON PARLIAMENTARY REFORMS

¶3. (C) The meeting began with each of the party representatives giving their own readout on the status of the talks on parliamentary procedures reform. The ruling Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party had opened discussions earlier in the week with opposition parties to negotiate on details of a package of parliamentary reforms based on recommendations by an international advisory group (represented by Germany, UK, Canada and India). CUDP leaders, who concluded negotiations with the EPRDF on June 21, said they had not gotten everything they wanted, but had made some important gains. Beyene, however, informed A/S Frazer that the EPRDF had refused to give in to their demands. After he had explained the details of remaining disagreements, the Charge pointed out that many UEDF complaints were not part the package originally suggested by the international experts (e.g. right

to stage a walk-out of parliament), but some were in fact important (e.g. having necessary quorum to introduce legislation). (NOTE: The UEDF and the OFDM had refused (contrary to the Charge,s urging) to negotiate at the same table with the CUDP. In past meetings with the Charge and Emboffs, they indicated they &would get a better deal8 by negotiating separately. In fact, after two days of meetings with the EPRDF on June 22 and 23, the talks between the EPRDF and the UEDF/OFDM ended in a stalemate. END NOTE.)

¶4. (U) Beyene and Merera indicated that they would meet one more time on June 26 with the EPRDF to attempt to move forward with reforms. The EPRDF planned to put a final package forward to the parliament on June 27. A/S Frazer and Charge urged the opposition parties to work together and focus on issues which were included in recommendations of international experts. This was not a time to play hard ball with the ruling party to score points, but rather was a significant opportunity to advance the rule of law in Ethiopia.

EPRDF RESTRICTIONS ON OPPOSITION PARTIES

¶5. (C) Responding to questions by A/S Frazer regarding opposition parties, abilities to properly represent constituencies, all representatives expressed frustrations at restrictions placed on them by the GoE. Specifically, they explained that none of them have been able to travel to their home regions in order to meet with their constituents. They had thus been blocked from understanding the opinions and interests of their districts. They reported being told by local EPRDF officials that since the were federal

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parliamentarians, they did not need to travel to other regions; their business was in Addis Ababa. When asked how they were actually prevented from going, Dr. Beyene explained that: 1) regional officials make it known that the police &cannot be responsible for their safety8; 2) they could not call meetings of their constituents; and 3) the regional governments (which are appointed by the GoE) refused to meet with them on local matters. The opposition leaders pointed out that the approximately 15 million voters that they represented did not have their voices heard in parliament and that leaders could not properly represent them.

¶6. (C) Temesgen also raised the issue of the recent, arbitrary appointment by the government of new board to oversee state media. He reported that on June 22, the day after his party finished parliamentary procedure talks with the EPRDF, the EPRDF rammed through parliament the appointment of the media board with little input from the opposition. Temesgen complained that his constituents, who have access to primarily government media, do not hear how the CUDP is representing them. He later revealed, however, that a ruling party official had contacted him to request a nomination from the CUDP to the media board, which he had provided. Nevertheless, Temesgen complained that this kind of informal consultation was inadequate and did not contribute to a spirit of confidence and bipartisanship.

LIMITED INFORMATION ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

¶7. (C) A/S Frazer gave opposition leaders her assessment of political issues in Ethiopia as well as some views on regional peace and stability. She pointed out that the current cross-border issues with Eritrea and Somalia could dramatically affect domestic Ethiopian political matters. Opposition leaders expressed their gratitude for the information, and for the concern that A/S Frazer demonstrated for Ethiopia. However, they also conveyed frustration that they received important information on foreign affairs only

from the USG reps or the media, rather than directly from the GoE. They claimed they were kept in the dark on such matters by the GoE and were not consulted by the ruling party. A/S Frazer said she saw similarities to other British-based parliamentary systems in the region; there were not good mechanisms for the exchange of such foreign policy information. She suggested however, that post might be able to assist in establishing contacts with opposition parties in Kenyan and Uganda to share information on regional political matters. This idea was enthusiastically accepted by opposition representatives.

HUDDLESTON